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SOME ABORIGINAL ALPHABETS—A STUDY

PART II.

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(Read before the Historical Society Dec. 12, 1900.)

It will be remembered that I gave at the May meeting a short account of two aboriginal alphabets—the Vei and the Cherokee. I traced their origin and development with the intention of contrasting them, at a later time, with a still more singular one that was found on Easter Island in the South Seas.

Easter Island is the most eastern point of inhabited land in Polynesia. This island, a mere speck of volcanic land in the South Pacific ocean, holds one of the human mysteries of the world. It is about ten miles long and four broad, and contains only about thirty-two square miles of cultivable land. It is over two thousand miles from the nearest land towards the east, and five hundred from its nearest neighbor on the west in that great archipelago. It stands like a lonely sentinel over that waste of waters, as does the Sphinx over Egypt's sands, and holds in its past as unfathomable a riddle. When first discovered, as it was said to have contained two to five thousand people, but as in every instance, contact with the Caucasion has wrought havoc with their numbers. A century ago slave dealers raided the island and carried numbers of the inhabitants into slavery. Even less than one hundred years ago, the Peruvian government carried away captive nearly the whole population to work in their guano islands. Later, on returning a portion of these to their homes, smallpox was introduced and the once populous island became a graveyard. At the present time there are only about 150 of the native population left. The island is now a dependency of Chili. It is leased to a firm of sheepmen, and a resident manager, assisted by a few of the natives, rules over its destinies. These natives belong to the great Polynesian family, and possess all the racial characteristics common to this people. The routes of emigration, by which the South Sea islands were peopled, and the relative time in connection therewith, are, approximately, fairly well understood. Everywhere they either displaced a pre-existent people, or found the evidence of such having occupied the islands.

In many of the islands scattered throughout these regions are found cyclopean structures of stone, of the origin of which the present islanders have no knowledge whatever. These structures consist of pyramidal piles of stone, of walled enclosures, of vast platforms, and of extensive roadways of the same material. These stone structures were laid without the use of mortar; sometimes they contained enclosed rooms; the true arch seems to have not been known, but frequent examples of the overlapping arch are seen. Sometimes these huge stones have been quarried nearby, in other instances they have been dragged for many miles overland, and in still others brought by water from distant parts of the island on which they are found, or even from a distant island. Many of these stones are so large that it would tax our mechanical ingenuity to put them in place. These structures all present the appearance of great age; covered with moss and earth, thrown down by earthquakes, and overgrown by dense forests. Their builders came, erected them, occupied them, and vanished, leaving not even a memory behind. Common characteristics pertain to them all yet in some isolated groups of islands they have features peculiar to themselves. Thus Easter Island, though so remote from the others, and as we would think, inaccessible, has more striking ruins than any other South Sea island. In different parts of this island, there have been erected great stone platforms, and on these platforms are set up huge statues. These statues only represent the body from the hips upward. The faces are long and striking in appearance. They are not portraits, as they are all fashioned from one pattern, and for the same reason they cannot be totems. If they represent gods, their mythology must have had a strange sameness to it. On each statue is an immense stone head dress.

But few rock carvings are found in the South Sea islands. Those in Easter Islands, while in few in number, are conventional in form and present characteristics common to all undeveloped peoples. On some of these sculptured rocks are figures of birds, which in some respects recall those of our own northwest coast Indians. All over Polynesia, modern emigration has been from west to east, with lateral branchings to the north or south. But strange to say, Easter Island traditions which are given with great minuteness, claim their arrival from the east and from a tropical country.

Every Polynesian people preserved the geneology of their rulers as sacredly as did the old Hebrews. Missionaries, scholars, and intelligent tradesmen who have spent a life time among them, all give great credence to these lists. The Easter Islanders have a list of

57 kings, the first dating from their arrival in the country. Allowing fifteen years to a reign, it would give 855 years, or about 1045 A. D., as the date of their arrival.

Some peculiarities pertaining to this people, seem to lend color to this claim of a different origin. Circumcision was common to the Polynesians, but unknown to the Easter Islanders.

A novel method in war with them, unknown elsewhere, only among the old Romans, was the use of a large hand-net, which, cast over an antagonist, rendered his capture or destruction easy. With the sole exception of these Islanders, none of the Polynesian race possessed the art of writing.

We possess many examples of their writing, *but cannot read it*. These inscriptions are all on wooden tablets, varying in size from four inches wide to six inches long to one seven inches wide and five feet long.

The characters apparently have been cut with an obsidian tool, and are peculiar in design, the human figure frequently appearing in a conventionalized form.

"A casual glance at the Easter Island tablet is sufficient to note the fact that they differ materially from other Kyriologic writings. The pictorial symbols are engraved in regular lines on depressed channels, separated by slight ridges, intended to protect the hieroglyphics from injury by rubbing. * * * The symbols on each line are alternately reversed; those on the first stand upright, and those on the next line are upside down, and so on by regular alternation. This unique plan makes it necessary for the reader to turn the tablet and change its position at the end of every line. The reading should commence at the lower left-hand corner. * * * "

—(William J. Thomson, paymaster U. S. Navy, in *Te Pito Te Henua*, or Easter Island.)

I said "to read it." This, however, is only a surmise. In the year 1886, the U. S. S.S. Mohican visited the island for the purpose of exploration. A party remained on the island one month, and made a very careful examination of every part of it. They succeeded in collecting several of these tablets, and in getting photographs of others in the hands of parties, who would not dispose of them. Probably no others will ever again be found on the islands. Paymaster Thomson, who published the main report of the expedition, learned that there was living an old man who was able to read these inscriptions. This was possibly a last chance to be by no means neglected. This man was hunted up. The natives today are nominally Catholic. Unfortunately some former Catholic priest, having

a mission there, had forbidden the natives to read these tablets, the knowledge of which had been confined to a few privileged persons. This man was asked to read the inscription, but for fear of his salvation refused, and on being importuned, ran away and hid. Science must not be balked. The exigency of the case made permissible extraordinary measures. On a rainy evening he was tracked to his house. The explorers entered unceremoniously and took possession. At first he was sullen and would not talk, but a little cajollery and a subrefuge along with the judicious use of a little stimulant unloosed his tongue, and he began reading the inscriptions for them. It was soon noticed that he was not following the lines closely, and he was charged with fraud. This somewhat disconcerted him, but he maintained that while the signification of the separate signs had been lost, that his translation was in the main correct. This was the best they could do, and the reading was carefully taken down as it proceeded. Afterwards another old man was found who claimed to be able to read them. On being tested he read the same way the first one did, and gave the same interpretation to each different tablet. Evidently old traditions had been carefully transmitted, and certain traditions unvaryingly attached to certain tablets. These translations relate to their national history and religion.

In all probability there is some foundation for the claim they make. But whence came these characters? Did some Cadmus or Se-quo-yah of that island world invent them? Reasoning from my former standpoint, and one which seems borne out by the conditions, they were not produced by an unaided native mind. They came from without. From whence? Certainly not from the West. Their traditions of a former home so minutely recorded, must have a basis of fact. But characters like these are found nowhere else, at least in connected lines. The nearest approach to them are rude pictographs found on rocks in both South and North America. We cannot reconcile their racial characteristics with their traditions of an Eastern origin.

Are both correct? Who was the Se-quo-yah? Who will unravel the mystery?